

LIFE BOOK REVIEW

L.B.J. in his Sunday best

THE VANTAGE POINT

Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969

by LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON

(Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.) \$15.00

More than most Presidents, Lyndon Johnson was many men. He could be the brilliant and masterful executive, passionate in his commitment, astute in his strategy, unrelenting in his pressure. He could be the egotistical, mendacious and brutal bully, determined to humiliate everyone around him. He could be the Texas charmer, confiding and beguiling, telling wonderful southwestern tales with wit and gusto. And he could be the pious statesman—this was his usual television role—the archbishop of consensus; bland, sanctimonious, self-serving, combining salient features of Pecksniff and Uriah Heep. It is mostly in this last mood, alas, in which he has written this account of his presidency.

The other roles do not entirely disappear. One sees a good deal of the populist leader in action, and there is a sprinkling of frontier humor. Malice, though generally suppressed, occasionally pops out in the turn of a phrase or the twist of an adjective. But *The Vantage Point* generally exhibits President Johnson in his Sunday best. Even this might not have been fatal. After all, neither Harry Truman nor Dwight Eisenhower put their infirmities on display, at least in their presidential memoirs, though each also published more personal essays in recollection. But Truman and Eisenhower both wrote two volumes on their days in the White House, and their accounts have considerable documentary value for the historian. In this regard, *The Vantage Point* is too short. If President Johnson decided to be tedious, he could at least have been informative.

Those who followed public affairs in the '60s will find limited documentation and few surprises. The most astonishing revelation is that he did not decide to run again in 1964 until the Democratic convention had

begun. Can this be? Would he really have stood aside and let the nomination go to Robert Kennedy? In any case, this incident leads him to print a marvelous memorandum from Lady Bird Johnson urging him to run—a memorandum that, in its shrewdness and affection, gives some sense of the part this remarkable woman has played in his life.

For the rest, the material is generally familiar. President Johnson takes legitimate pride in the sweep and imagination of his domestic program; but he does not add much to our knowledge about it. He has little space for politics or for characterizations of his colleagues and opponents. He does not omit, however, such points as that, when he visited Nehru, Ambassador Galbraith told him he had never known the Indian prime minister to stay up so late; or that, when he visited the Pope, His Holiness was supposed to have said, "What a wonderful talk." Admission of error is not notable.

This is especially true in foreign policy. The Dominican intervention was a triumph. As for Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh's "aggression" against South Vietnam was "part of a larger, much more ambitious strategy being conducted by the Communists," especial-



ly in Peking. "If we ran out on Southeast Asia, I could see trouble ahead . . . in Europe, in Africa and in Latin America." No one could have tried harder for negotiations. Domestic protest "prolonged the war, prevented a peaceful settlement . . . and weakened us as a nation."

This intransigence on Vietnam—the persistence in the illusions that the Vietcong were the spearhead of a planned Chinese offensive; that American withdrawal would beckon Moscow and Peking into a "vacuum of power," as if Hanoi did not have the most stable government in the area; that if we did not stand where we had no business being, our adversaries would suppose we would not stand where our vital interests were engaged; that unanimity behind the policy could have gained us a victory we could not win on the battlefield; that negotiation which asked the other side for unconditional surrender had any chance of success—was President Johnson's tragic failure, just as his authentic and moving concern about racial injustice and poverty at home was his supreme strength. In domestic policy, his knowledge was great and his instincts were sure; in foreign policy, he was rigid, dogmatic and ignorant. The irony of his presidency is that he righteously sacrificed the things he knew best on the altar of the things he knew worst.

by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

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